# Lullabye – Anneleen Keppens

## Who carries the mother?

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Link to the original article (in Flemish)

Radiant motherhood? Fortunately, there are artists who draw on their own experiences and occasionally find the time and space to challenge this taboo, offering a more nuanced picture. Choreographer Anneleen Keppens is the latest to do so. Her solo ‘Lullabye’ evokes as many different emotions as there are colours in the fabrics of its stage design. This multifaceted physical evocation suggests that care is too rarely reciprocal.

As a man, and moreover one without children, the many performances about motherhood currently finding their way onto the stage make for tricky viewing. Are you sufficiently equipped to recognise and weigh all the associations they evoke? At the same time, there is a risk of overcompensating in your reading: before you know it, you are reducing every scene to an image of motherhood, losing sight of the broader vision of humanity they seek to convey.

### Cocoon

Fortunately, Anneleen Keppens does not belong to the conceptual school. Her ‘Lullabye’, which premiered in Bruges as part of the AMOK festival about care, is above all an attempt to make things tangible. The 75-minute performance unfolds through largely accessible imagery, underpinned by a clear musical atmosphere. At first, Nicolas Rombouts’ soundtrack provides a slow, meditative flow, then gives way to a more restless acceleration, before finally settling back into a soothing bath of sound. The same three-part structure characterises the solo as a whole. Together, we travel along a bell curve of exhaustion, overdrive and relief.

### “Dismantled connection is the thread running through this installation.”

Even more instrumental in creating this gentle atmosphere is the scenography by Erki De Vries and Sofie Durnez: a stripped-back tent supported by six slender poles, with just one wall still covered in a lively patchwork of colourful strips of fabric, hanging loose on either side of the weave. This feminine dressing immediately introduces visual dynamism, while also providing shelter for the rest of the space, as though we are stepping into a personal cocoon that has, however, been partly dismantled.

The floor, too, is covered with a tarpaulin made up of patches of purple, lilac, grey and blue. At three or four points, cords pull the fabric up into sharp peaks, as though we were looking at a mountainous landscape made of cloth. It exudes a warm intimacy, not least because we are seated on chairs and cushions in a half-circle, close around it. Dismantled connection is

the thread running through this installation.

## Time for pupation

We encounter Keppens curled up in the foetal position in her landscape, slowly rolling around, up against the little mounds. I see something halfway between depression and an exploratory mapping of territory, but in any case, an inward-looking beginning. There is a palpable sense of loneliness, amplified by a long, heavy sigh from a hunched body on all fours, like a suppressed scream that sounds as existential as it does cosmic. The exhaustion feels immense.

Things only begin to take shape when Keppens pulls her grey-blue sweater over her head, and in this way gives birth to a folded-up baby that she cradles in her arms. Playful moments (hide-and-seek, playing horsey) soon alternate with forceful gestures of rejection, such as when she spins the sweater around like a salad spinner or promptly hurls it into the audience. Care is not only a blessing. It is also a burden. A restriction, too, bringing one to the brink of losing oneself.

It is precisely this darker underside that Keppens occasionally punctuates with lullabies: repetitive little phrases in English, spoken over the droning music, but rather address the things that keep her awake. Sometimes they are little more than isolated words, as in a rhyming sequence ranging from ‘repetition’ and ‘education’ to ‘consternation’: exhausting states you go through as as a mother, almost like a machine. At other times, they form the refrain to a more dance-like exploration of the state of her own body: “Holding space, radical help, where am I?”

## “Lullabye reveals the rather uninvigorating state of those who provide care, left to fend for themselves.”

Her body has opened, but somehow never completely closed again. It appears to have become unfamiliar to her, as she suggests by feeling her legs or with a hand that flutters at lightning speed. It almost seems to detach itself from her arm.

In this way, ‘Lullabye’ reveals the rather uninvigorating state of those who provide care, left to fend for themselves. They try to gather something together or hold things together, while also having to carry their own burdens. Who carries the mother? At times, Keppens reaches out meaningfully towards us, ‘the village’ gathered around her, inviting us to briefly hold her sweater/baby together with her, or to cradle it in a piece of cloth. For a fleeting moment, the solo performance turns into community theatre. It feels somewhat simplistic, but also sincere.

Ultimately, however, the solo performer is left to fend for herself. In the most visually striking scene, after sweeping all her fabrics together, Keppens stretches a stark white elastic band across her now-empty tent. She first wraps herself in it like a mummy, then disappears entirely into it, suspended in a deep hammock. Her lifeless hanging posture, like an anonymous body in a white sling, evokes the image of an overzealous fly caught in a spider’s web and completely drained, but also that of a caterpillar in its cocoon. Time for pupation, for transformation through rest. Self-care turns out to be the key to the solo.

## Humus in autumn

While in earlier works such as ‘Movement Essays’ and ‘Blue Moon Spring’, Anneleen Keppens explored more artistic questions, the focus here is more concerned with social issues, though no less artistically driven. The dismantling and redressing of her installation gives ‘Lullabye’ a distinctive aesthetic, almost ritualistic character, even if the technical transformation of the set (unfastening and reattaching the fabrics, moving aside scenographic elements that are no longer needed) sometimes requires so much care that the work’s thematic coherence loses some of its force. ‘Lullabye’ tries to do many things at once. The solo itself is also a patchwork, rather than following a single coherent thread.

## “Motherhood and care are practices that manifest as inner rollercoasters, as silent fields with peaks and valleys.”

That is, of course, precisely the point Keppens wants to make about motherhood and care more generally: there is no single analysis, no single story. These are practices that manifest as inner rollercoasters, as silent fields with peaks and valleys, as a continuous push and pull between getting stuck and transforming. ‘Lullabye’ not only reveals the full range of their impact, but also transcends it through suggestive images, such as a luminous blue sphere representing Mother Earth.

Even if these are not particularly surprising additions, they still serve as a reminder, even to men like me, that self-care is essentially not an act of withdrawal, but a worldly gesture. “Rest to resist”, as Keppens puts it in one of her lullabies. Her solo makes this fashionable slogan tangible once again, something we can see, feel and touch. Like shimmering humus in autumn.

(Translation: Tender Ground)